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ABSTRACT

A writing class that includes individuals from different disciplines can allow its members to gain a useful perspective on what people do, study, and stand for in the world outside the writing class. There are three assignments that can be particularly useful to explain the view of writing as an extra-disciplinary activity: (1) studying a prose writer of the student's choice; (2) writing a personal research paper; and (3) analyzing the structure of knowledge in the student's own discipline. There are several biases that will inform responses to the students' investigations, such as truth cannot, ultimately be caught; good writing will create believable demonstrations of what it is that has been captured; and really good writing can fool a person. The writing course is the best place in which to learn about those values the university holds most dear--the objective pursuit of truth and the relativity of knowledge--and to examine the nature and validity of those same values. (MS)

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WRITING AS AN EXTRA-DISCIPLINARY ACTIVITY

[Paper presented at Conference on College Composition and Communication, 1989]

The most liberating teaching and learning in which I participate occurs each time I teach a writing class at the University of Vermont. Unlike the American literature classes which I also teach, whose content is largely determined by tradition and textbook ordering policies, the content of my writing class is largely determined by who registers for the class and participates in our class meetings. In the writing class, the content reforms anew each time the class is offered.

Though each of us in the writing class belongs to different sets of discourse/disciplinary commnities, each with its own set of assumptions and conventions, we who are together in this class form a new smaller, and less prescribed community, one from which we can sometimes observe our selves and our disciplines with some distance--a distance which often allows us to gain a useful perspective on what it is we do, study, and stand for in the world outside the writing class.

What do I mean that the writing class allows the generation of a useful perspective on what we do, study, and stand for?

Just this: In my "Advanced Writing: Non Fiction" class (English 178) I am currently asking my juniors and seniors (19 from 8 different disciplines) to write three distinct pieces during the 15 week semester: (1) to study a prose writer of their choice, (2) to write a personal research paper, and (3) to analyze the structure of knowledge in their own discipline. (They essentially work on all three concurrently, with final drafts not due until the course is over. At times they all agree to bring a draft of one or the other to class at the same time.)

Let me describe these three assgiments to explain my view of writing as an extra-disciplinary activity:

1. The study of one prose writer of their choice asks the students' to figure out and describe to the rest of us, what makes this writer so effective? What can they learn about writing by reading him or her closely? (Writers picked this term range from Joan Didion and Ellen Goodman to John McPhee, Tom Wolfe, and P.J. O'Rourke.) We learn about matters of form, style, and stance from skilled post-disciplinary writers aiming at literate middle- class Americans, [illegible] a variety of political axes in the process.

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My role here is to say back to my skilled student writers how well they have taught me, a novice, to appreciate Joan, Ellen, Tom, and the boys. The format, style, and stance of these papers is open.

My hope is that the close study of good models--writers outside of the academy--will open up new possibliities for my student writers, most of whom spend too much time reading the safe, cautious, convention-bound writing inside the academy.

2. The second assignment asks students to conduct some personal research (individually or collaboratively) on an issue with some local manifestation, which will allow site visits and interviews in addition library searching. Current topics include (1) hazing at a UVM sorority, (2) the homeless in downtown Burlington, and (3) the the Abnaki Indians in northeast corner of the state--this last a three-person collaborative project.

Again, my role is an interested spectator-reader looking to be informed about something about which I usually know little. I do suggest that they look at samples of good investigative reporting in periodicals ranging from the New Yorker and Village Voice to the Burlington Free Press and UVM's student newspaper, The Cynic.

My hope is that this assignment will put these students out in the community at least for a short time and cause some dialogue, interaction, and possibly even understanding of that community. If the previous investigation of writers such as Didion, Wolfe, and McPhee has not already done so, then this is the assignment that breaks the artificial walls between research-based writing and writing with a strong, distinctive voice.

3. The last assignment is an investigation of the "structure of knowledge" in each student's own discipline: each student investigates his or her own major discipline from the mildly-objective distance of my writing class and find out what makes it tick. I remind them that their major provides them with a dominant perspective from which to view and make sense of the world. Of the three assigments, this causes the most confusion and consternation at the beginning and, when it works, the most illumination and insight at the end.

To help write this last paper, I suggest various strategies: keep a journal for the course of this investigation; observe the method and mode of discourse in one of your major classes; do a close reading of syllabi used in several of classes in your discipline; interview more than one instructor, asking him/her what the discipline is all about; interview classmates with similar majors; examine the language and assumptions of your textbooks and course handouts, etc.

My hope is that this assignment will provide students with an historical self-consciousness about their own point of view, values, and voice--a self-consciousness which should make it possible to not only understand their own adoptive discourse community, but to critique it and go beyond it as well. I want my students to see themselves as writers--as opposed to business, political science or English majors--where "nothing is written"; that is nothing need be beyond investigation, observation, analysis, and interpretation.

But nothing is neutral. Certainly not me as a reader of student texts. Nor is the writing class--safe haven that it is from some storms--a vacuum. There are guiding assumptions that I will reinforce and others that I will discourge, no matter what the topic of investigation. (I am, after all, a product myself of academic communities--the University of Wisconsin in particular--which collectively hold certain assumptions about the generation and dissemination of knowledge.) In my closing minute let me list a few of the biases that inform my responses to my students' investigations:

1. It is a good idea to pursue truth wherever you can find it.

2. That truth cannot, ultimately be caught.

3. That some methods of pursuit will get you closer to a capturing it than others.

4. That good writing will create believable demonstrations of what it is you've captured.

5. That really good writing can fool you.

I believe the writing course--one of the few truly extra-disciplinary courses in the university--is the single best place in which to learn about those values the university holds most dear--the objective pursuit of truth and the relativity of knowlege. At the same time, the writing course is the best place from which to examine the nature and validity of those same values.

[March 18, 1989]